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ABSTRACT

The author examines the various forms by which a child's progress through elementary-secondary education may be documented and focuses on the process of integrating observations into a valid sequence of documentation. Noted as forms of documentation are: (1) individual daily activity and academic records; (2) collections of the child's work; (3) weekly observational records; (4) curriculum records; (5) friendship and work pattern observations; (6) floor plans and room arrangement changes; (7) formation of classroom settings; (8) observations of children by ancillary staff; and (9) additional interviews of teachers or children. The role of observation in integrating these forms into a documentation whole is viewed as fundamental, since the documentation emerges from observed data rather than from a theoretical framework or other external source. Emphasized in observing as it relates to documentation is the fact that it is an attitude requiring openness, immersion in the object of observation, and repeated encounters with the object under varying circumstances. This is contrasted to the "scientific" observation approach of detachment and isolation from the object being observed. The process of charting and recharting of observational data, and the assembling of these data into an integrated, descriptive essay, is discussed. It is noted that the intention of documentation is not to explain or to interpret the child or the child's behavior according to a particular theoretical framework, nor to conclude that certain characteristics are entirely positive or negative. Rather it is to embed each aspect of the child's expressions of meaning into the full context of his or her expression, with particular characteristics presented in appropriate balance and weight. (MJB)

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DOCUMENTARY PROCESSES

(Paper for Presentation at AERA, March, 1978)

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND THE ERIC SYSTEM CONTRACTORS"

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Introduction

From its inception in 1965, The Prospect School has been committed to an ongoing examination of both theory and practice. The basis of this commitment to the essential reciprocity of thought and action is the observation that practice uninformed by thought, stultifies, while theory uninformed by practice is sterile.

In keeping with this commitment, while the philosophy of the school is rooted in the humanistic tradition, the school is not by that token constrained to a specific style or method of teaching and instruction. Further, though the school is committed to the support of the continuity of each child's learning experience, it does not fromulate that experience according to theoretical stages ascribed to the development of thinking, personality, or the person.

The basis of the documenting process is the gathering of descriptive data by the teachers in the school. The gathering of observational data by teachers is supported by reflective processes that focus and integrate the observations. Variations of these same reflective processes are also the vehicle for more formalized studies that emerge from the documenting process. The basic format for data gathering can be summarized as follows:

- individual daily activity and academic records on each child
- collections of children's work--drawing, writing, etc.--these are very important because they are a direct statement of the child's perspective
- weekly observational records by teachers which address

  physical presence and gesture
  social relationships
  emotional tenor
  interests and involvements
  academic activity

- twice yearly or quarterly curriculum records based on interviews with teachers conducted by ancillary staff

- twice yearly or quarterly friendship and work patterns among kids
- floor plans, and room arrangement changes
- formation of classroom settings--floor plans, provisioning, activities, children's choices (twice yearly), observations done by ancillary staff/principal
- observations of children by ancillary staff (occasional)
- additional interviews of teachers or kids (in support of particular studies)

In practice, the process of observing and recording means that teachers are regularly reviewing and examining the school experience of each child, the curriuculum emergent from the children's interests and work, and the setting itself in terms of provisioning and human relationships.

Thus, there are several levels at which the observing and recording involved in documenting support teaching practice, and hence are recognized as valuable by the teacher. Most immediately and directly, the thought given to each child when the teacher reviews the week's work in order to write a weekly descriptive record is a significant support to practice in and of itself. However, processes that bring together teachers, ancillary staff and principal to share perspectives on a child and his work, employ the continuity and multiplicity of observations and records to provide a deeper perception not only of the particular child but of all children. For example, the reflective process (called the Staff Review of Children) which we use, and which has been adapted for use in many other schools, culminates in specific recommendations on ways to build from the child's strengths, and ways to make the learning environment more responsive to his needs--and by implication to those of other children. Alternatively, the

accumulated work of a child in a medium such as writing, painting or blocks can be the focus of discussion. When this focus is provided, the shared perspectives of staff contribute insight into provisioning and curriculum more generally as well as into the themes and thoughts expressed by a particular child.

However, in addition to the teacher's ongoing review, a rich layer of descriptive data is accrued through the regular collecting of observations and work. This data can be integrated in a variety of ways to make visible the patterns of continuity and transformation emergent from the data through time as these are descriptive of the child, the curriculum, or the setting. Without minimizing the importance of the teacher's ongoing review made possible by the gathering of the data, I would like to focus the rest of this discussion on observing on the processes for integrating these observations to prepare a documentation.

Observation and Documentation

Observation is the heart of the matter, since the documentation emerges from these data rather than from a theoretical framework or other external source. I have already noted that the teacher is the primary observer, with supporting observations made by ancillary staff. Since a teacher is a participant in the setting, the kind of observing referred to in the documenting process is not the so-called "objective" observation usually referred to in current science and technology.

The scientific observer, detached, objective, at work in a laboratory equipped with standardized and complex recording instruments is a cliché

of our times. It is, in fact, so common a view that the term observer is virtually synonymous with distance, detachment, impartiality and neutrality. "The United Nations has sent in observers"--i.e., neutral agents to render impartial, disinterested judgements. From this point of view, the teacher in the classroom is thought to need an outside observer because the teacher is too active, too involved, and too close to the situation to be capable of objective observations.

The extent to which detachment is the accepted posture of the observer, and objectivity the accepted standard for observing, is strikingly apparent through the reverberations caused in the scientific world by Niels Bohr's now famous statement that the observer is necessarily participant in the object of observation. Heisenberg's lucid interpretation of this statement is thought provoking and particularly so, since the full implications have not yet been acknowledged by most scientists now in the practice of scientific research. The key statement in that interpretation is Heisenberg's assertion that there is

> a subjective element in the description of atomic events, since the measuring device has been constructed by the observer, and we have to remember that what we observe is not nature in itself but nature exposed to our method of questioning. Our scientific work in physics consists in asking questions about nature in the language that we possess and trying to get an answer from experiment by the means that are at our disposal. In this way quantum theory reminds us, as Bohr has put it, of the old wisdom that when searching for harmony in life one must never forget that in the drama of existence we are ourselves both players and spectators. (1958, p.58)

The result of viewing the observer as neutral and detached is, as Heisenberg acknowledges, to minimize the act of observing and to emphasize the operations of recording. The observer assumes the relatively passive posture of recording according to a standardized procedure. Ideally, he records measurements provided by a refined instrumentation. Less ideally, and in the less rigorously scientific fields such as psychology, he records behaviors or traits which can later be coded numerically and made available to statistical treatment according to the same procedures applied to data gathered in the physical world. However loose or rigorous, the focus on observing within this framework is actually a focus on recording, and on devising standardized recording formats to ensure the detachment and objectivity of the observer.

By contrast, what is emphasized in observing within the documenting process is an attitude, which can be described as a manner of seeing and of remembering. That attitude requires open-ness, immersion in the object of observation, and repeated encounters with the object under varying circumstances.

Schachtel call this manner of observing, objectifying, and explicity differentiates it from "objective" observation.

> By "objectification" I do not mean objectivity, but the phenomenon of man's encounter with more or less definite objects as a certain type of relatedness emerges between him and his environment. The degree of objectification is characterized by the degree to which the object is perceived as existing indepently of the perceiver and the degree to which the richness of its qualities is perceived. (1959, p. 85)

He goes on to say that to be open to the world is to approach the object with interest and to extend to the object the totality of its being.

> The act of interest is total and it concerns the totality of its object. . .On this hinges the often observed fact that the object, the world, reveals itself to man only to the degree and quality of the interest he takes in it. . .Human perception is not only in the service of the question, addressed to the object, "How can I use you or protect myself against you?" but. . .it also answers the question, "Who or what are you who are part of this same world of which I am a part?". It is this latter question which concerns the totality of the object, while the former always concerns only the need-related aspects of the object. (1959, p. 222)

Further, openness and interest extend to the observer the capacity to stay with something for long periods of time and thereby, to understand the manner of its dwelling in time and space.

> Only the adult who is able to be completely absorbed, again and again, often for many hours and days, in an object that arouses his interest will be the one who enlarges his, and sometimes man's scope of perception and of experience. A painter may spend many days, weeks or months, or even years, in looking at the same mountains as Cezanne did, or a blade of grass or bamboo leaves or branches of a tree, as many of the Chinese and Japanese masters did, without tiring of it. The same is true of the poet's or writer's devoted love for his object, of which Rilke speaks, of the true naturalist's perception of the plant or animal with which he has to live for long periods of time in order to acquire that intimate knowledge from which eventually new meaning and understanding will be born. (1959, p. 239)

To abide with something, is to make it visible in its dwelling place--that is, in all of the object's multiple points of relatedness to other things and to the passage of time. Therefore, observing locates the thing in the vicinity of other things and makes visible both its continuities and its transformations through time.

The school's focus in observing is to recognize and describe the child's deep interests as these are expressed through his engagements with mediums within a setting. This description depends upon grasping

the individual child's preferred and characteristic modes for raising questions and for exploring the world. Within this framework, observing has a triple perspective: recognizing and describing through time the expressiveness of the body; recognizing and describing the body's correlatives in the things of the world (including other persons); and recognizing and describing the ways and points at which the person's bodily expression is reciprocated by other things and persons.

As a process, observing can be most effectively carried out by persons who are most continuously engaged with a child--that is, teachers and parents. These are the most effective observers because they see the child through the greatest variations of setting and are best able to see the continuities of expression and meaning and also the transformation of those continuities as a function of time and place.

The documentary accounts of the child integrate these observations to describe what the child recognizes in the world and his or her statements of relationship to the world through the mediums, motifs, and themes that make the relationship visible.

Some clarification of these terms is needed. Motif is used here as it is in art to refer to the pervasive subject, whether object or image, of a person's work. However, the meaning of motif has also been expanded to include the constant activities, processes, qualities and relationships in the persons work. Examples of motifs would be "trust," "miniature," "interlocking systems," or "fort construction," as these occur in such mediums as play, drawing, writing, reading and constructions.

These studies of the person are carried out through time in order to establish the coherence and the durability of the mediums and motifs through which personal meaning is stated and disclosed. Coherence addresses the continuity in the perspectives and themes expressed in the person's life, while durability addresses their transformation.

The purpose of these studies is simply to make the person more visible and, therefore, more available to thought and reflection. Merleau-Ponty observes that the body--and I would say the person--is more appropriately likened to a work of art than to a machine.

> "A novel, poem, picture, or musical work are individuals, that is, beings in which the expression is indistinguisable from the thing expressed, their meaning accessible only through direct contact. . .It is in this sense that our body is comparable to a work of art. It is a focal point of living meanings, not the function of a certain number of mutually variable terms. (1962, p. 151)

In keeping with this, the outcome of the study of the person is a portrait. To achieve this outcome the researcher attends to what Whitehead terms the composition of the person--that is, the internal coherence of details through which the essential nature of the person is revealed. Thus, as in any work of art, each detail gains its appropriate weight and value in reference to the whole, and yet to alter one particular is to destroy the entire composition. Whitehead describes this aesthetic order as follows:

> The whole displays its component parts each with its own value enhanced; and the parts lead up to a whole which is beyond themselves, and yet not destructive to themselves. (1958, p. 86)

The first step in the documentation and protrayal of a child is to arrange the diverse forms of data--records, children's work, interviews, etc., --in chronological order. The entire record is re-read several times and

pieces of the child's work are selected for description through a reflective conversation. For example, for a child (Misha) for whom the motif of houses is pervasive in stories and drawings, a number of reflections were carried out including "hidden", "domestic", and "wild". These reflections were followed by detailed descriptions of specific pieces of work.

Immersion in the records and in the work allows themes or headings to emerge. These headings are used for the initial exploration of the data. In a current documentation of a child, (Misha), the initial headings included the following:

> Atmosphere and detail; physical presence and gesture;
> control/standards; observing/watching;
> wild/tame/domestic; privacy/containment;
> writing/stories/reading; relationships;
> power; analysis/logic; disposition

These headings differ in significant ways from classificatory categories employed in classical research. It has already been noted that the headings are emergent from the data. The initial check on the impressionistic order of the data suggested by these headings is to inscribe under each heading every datum that can be emcompassed within it. Thus, theoretically, any given datum might be inscribed under each of the headings. The purpose of this overlapping is to make visible as many points of intersection as possible within the person's total experience without violating the temporal sequence of the data. In addition, this free variation of the data allows each datum to be viewed in reference to each other datum. In this way, the nuances of the data are reflected within the total order, but also each particular enhances each other particular as well as contributing

to the whole. The process also identifies specific data that by virtue of their overlap with a wide range of other data are critical to an understanding of the order and pattern within the total range of data.

In the process of inscribing the data and considering the relationship of each datum to each heading and to each other datum, the documenter identifies continuities and divergences through time and across headings. The inclusiveness of the charting process identifies its differences from the categorizing of data typical of data analysis. Categorizing separates the data into mutually exclusive categories, in which, by definition, a given datum can only be subsumed to one category. Further, the category subsumes the particular datum, and it exists once categorized only as a special case of the general category. Thus, where charting particularizes and makes visible the phenomenon itself, categorization generalizes and abstracts it as a special case of a broader category of events.

The initial charting is followed by an unspecified number of rechartings according to the motifs, mediums and themes suggested by the initial exploration. Some of these headings are refinements of earlier headings, while others cut through the data from subtler angles than the more global characterization of the data provided by the initial headings. The ultimate number of rechartings for any study is dictated largely by practical considerations since the data itself is inexhaustible in terms of the perceptives in which it can be viewed. That is, each re-charting increases perception of the whole, and increasingly the whole "display (s) its component parts each with its own value enhanced. . ." The greater the attention

and time given to the charting, the richer, and more articulated the composition that emerges, since the relationship of the parts is increasingly specified and subtle.

The last step in the study is the descriptive essay in which all of the data is integrated in order to portray the child. Stated concretely, the essay reflects the thematic patterns emergent from the records, and employs the particular data within the records to document those patterns. For example, one small part of the portrayal of Misha illuminates the basis of her power as a writer in her interest in observing, her fascination with atmospheric effect, and her meticulous attention to detail.

Excerpt from Descriptive Essay on Misha: Writing

> Writing is a powerful medium for Misha. Virtually as soon as she began to write at age 7, she wrote full and complex stories. The early stories are remarkable for their form, composition and sense of language. For example, the adventures of Lucy and Gus in The Sea Treasure written when Misha was 8 years old is divided into episodes--The Big Surprise; The Fish is Free; The Magic Ocean; The Risky Swim, etc. It also has descriptive detail, dialogue, and internal continuity. The introduction reads,
>
> Once upon a time, there were two
> lit'le bears. And one's name was Gus
> and the other's name was Lucy.
>
> The first episode introduces the fish, and the second sets the plot,
>
> So one day Gus and Lucy were
> fishing when all of the sudden
> Lucy caught a fish. And it
> had orange dots on (its) back. . .

> So then the fish said to Gus
> and Lucy, "please let me go and
> if you do I will show you a
> treasure. . ."

As the example illustrates, Misha used her own writing from the first to explore such forms as the fairy tale. She also had an unerring sense of drama and climax, and her own rich vocabulary flowed freely into the dialogues.

Misha's present writing at age 12 is heavily invested in description--character sketches, setting the scene and creation of atmosphere. There is a quality of wholeness to her work, a sureness of detail that suggests that the story is integrated before she starts to write.

> I was now going about 80 miles per hour. I whizzed around the last corner. Finally the beach came in sight. I drove into the parking lot, I slammed on the brakes and the car came to a jerky halt. I swung open the car door and jumped out. I looked nervously around to see if anyone was watching me. Luckily nobody was in sight. I hurried down the foggy beach. The chilly air made me shiver so I quickly buttoned up my heavy rain coat and pulled my hat down so if anyone was on the beach they wouldn't recognize me. I now had a full view of the beach and remembered that I had buried the box near a fairly large size rock. I could see the rock in full view of the beach and remembered that I had buried the box near a fairly large size rock. I could see the rock pretty clearly except right in front of the rock a man in a grey sweatshirt was leaning over holding a square object which looked like the box I had buried there. Then an awful chill ran up my spine. . .

or

> In the corner was a woman in a rocking chair with a black shawl pulled tight around her skinny shoulders. She had on a limp worn dress that covered her legs. Her shoes were not visible because of the darkness. Her brown hair was in a bun, her face was hardly visible. . .Her eyes were focused on her knitting. She had a still even pace as if she could go on forever.
>
> The silence was solid and deep. You could hear the wind whipping around the cabin and then suddenly you could hear very faintly the sound of heavy footsteps crashing through the snow. . .

> Misha's taste for the exotic and for the macabre happening within an ordinary setting is well suited to her descriptive style and her ability to keep a situation ambiguous until the denouement. There is nearly always an element of surprise in Misha's writing. She also continues to explore conventions and styles from her own reading. During the fall, she devoted herself to the conventions of the mystery story and the style of Agatha Christie. More recently, the novel of manners has interested her. Play with words and phrasing always intrigues Misha.
>
> Straight exposition from a source is more burdensome to Misha, especially if the report must be brief or produced according to a strict time limit. A thumbnail sketch is harder than a report such as the one she did on Indians that allowed her to pull together a lot of details.
>
> Her talents for the descriptive makes her observational writing vivid and clear. She approaches such description through action words. Spelling, usage and grammatical structure are all strong. In diagramming sentences, her natural grasp of the relational came to the fore and she was able easily to understand the structure of sentences. Dictionaries, the thesaurus, or any word book is fascinating to Misha. . .

As noted earlier, the intention of the documentation is not to "explain or to interpret the child or his behaviors according to a particular theoretical framework (e.g., personality, theory, cognitive structures, etc.). Therefore, the essay does not include ascribed needs or motives, inferred causal relationships (e.g., Misha holds high standards because. . .) or attribution of the child's expressions or involvements to a general category such as "past experiences," "family problems," or "economic or cultural disadvantage." Rather, the essay includes explications of the potentiality within, for example, "control" or "power" or "observing" by specifying this quality for a particular child through its multiple intersections within the totality of his engagement.

The essay also does not include in a casual or unexamined way assumptions (or conclusions) that a quality such as control is only negative or limiting or that a quality such as power is altogether positive and strengthening. By embedding each aspect of the child's expressions of meaning to the full context of his or her expression, particular characteristics can be presented in appropriate balance and weight.

To portray the person to those primarily responsible for his or her education--teachers and parents--is to increase dramatically their capacity to make thoughtful choices in the interests of the child's education. At each point in the extended process described above, there is examination of setting, teaching practice, and the continuity of the child's experience and thought. It is also true that to see and know any one child fully is to know all children better. The uniqueness of the one calls up his or her shared perspectives with particular others, and embeds that perspective within the full range of human experience. It is through the processes that make this portrayal of the person possible, that the school has fulfilled its commitment to the reciprocity of thought and action--i.e., to an ongoing examination of practice.

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